Policy making and strategic environmental assessment at Hungarian local governments

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Background

Hungarian local governments are facing enormous environmental challenges at the verge of the country's accession to the European Union. In addition to the long lasting problems of inadequate wastewater treatment and industrial air pollution, recent economic development trends result in increased environmental pressures of road transport (noise and air pollution) as well as of municipal waste generation. Adoption of European Union policies and standards provide new opportunities and instruments for municipalities, yet there are also more and more responsibilities delegated to the local level of government. Local resources are, however, limited with regards to financial, institutional and technical capacities.

Integrating environmental aspects is the basis for sustainable development. To achieve an environmentally sustainable management structure, a vast array of instruments is needed. Each of these instruments has to be sophisticated yet simple. An instrument must be sophisticated enough to be appropriate for the purpose that it serves and for the complex environment we are living in. It must be simple to be understood by staff applying the instrument as well as by decision- makers. The latter have to provide financial and human resources to make the application possible. More importantly, the results produced by an instrument have to be understood and transformed into political action.

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is commonly defined as the application of environmental assessment to policies, plans and programs. More specifically, it is "a systematic, on-going process for evaluating at the earliest appropriate stage of publicly accountable decision making, the environmental quality, and consequences of alternative visions and development intentions incorporated in policy, planning, or programme initiatives, ensuring full integration of relevant biophysical, economic, social and political consideration" (Partidario, 1999).

According to ISO (1996), an environmental management system (EMS) is "that part of the overall management system that includes organisational structure, planning activities, responsibilities, practices, procedures, processes and resources for developing, implementing, achieving, reviewing and maintaining the environmental policy" (ISO 14001:1996). The EMS concept builds upon the 'plan-do-check-act' (PDCA) management cycle concept, also known as the 'Deming-model'. Implementing an EMS entails a systematic approach to environmental management and as a comprehensive tool the EMS pulls together other environmental management tools and strategies.

The Problem

There are sophisticated environmental management tools, such as SEA and EMS, for the integration of environmental aspects and to support local governments in dealing with the immense tasks of environmental protection and development. However, essential conditions for a widespread adoption of these instruments, such as sources of information, funding, as well as local capacities are extremely limited.

Central government has so far only provided limited support to local governments to build local environmental capacities. There have been hardly any guidance given on the adoption of comprehensive management tools. Even if local governments have decided to adopt such measures no funding is available from central sources to support such efforts. However, a key problem is that most local governments lack the expertise and capacity to initiate the adoption of such measures.

Options of Actions

Without the application of complex environmental policy and management instruments Hungarian local governments will fail to achieve sustainable local development. The complexity of the prevailing problems require comprehensive approach to dealing with them. Fire-fighting can only help in the short term, long term solutions can only be found with the application of adequate policy and management tools.

The wider uptake of SEA and EMS can be achieved by several means:

1. launching an information campaign on the importance, the basic characteristics and the methods of applying these tools;
2. establishing legal requirements that will force the adoption these instruments;
3. providing economic support to local governments' efforts through central funding mechanisms;
4. creating financial incentives for local governments; and
5. setting example through adopting comprehensive environmental tools at central government offices.

While all these means are potentially applicable to achieve the desired outcome, the effectiveness and efficiency of these mechanisms are likely to differ significantly. Most effective could seemingly be the establishment of a strict requirement for local governments to adopt these tools within short period of time. However, in the absence of financial support and professional guidance there is a high chance for local governments meeting the requirement only on paper.

On the other hand, 'soft' tools, such as an information campaign, are likely to lead to only a limited number of local governments ultimately deciding upon the adoption of such instruments. While many would find it 'interesting' to learn about these tools, most local governments would feel little motivated to actually adopt them.

Financial motivations seem to be essential for a wider uptake of these instruments. Negative incentives, such as fines or penalties, are probably not appropriate in this field, even if a strict legal requirement is envisaged. Most effective are those mechanisms where local governments can obtain specific funding for implementing these comprehensive tools.

Recommendations

Consequently, a combination of policy instruments are recommended for use by central government to support the wider adoption of comprehensive environmental management tools by local governments. Considering the different nature and origin of SEA and EMS the recommended policy instruments also differ.

With regards to SEA there is already a legal framework under preparation with objective of transposing the requirements of the EC SEA Directive into Hungarian law. It is recognised that the legislation will greatly contribute to the wide-scale adoption of SEA in Hungary. However, for effective and efficient implementation a number of specific recommendations are to be made:

1. Distinction should be made between plans and programmes within the land use planning system and those within any other policy field. Land use planning has a well developed system of assessment incorporated already into the planning process. This would require only minor modifications to satisfy the requirements of the Directive. On the other hand, other sectoral plans and programmes require a rather flexible approach to enable the planning processes to adopt effective SEA mechanisms.

2. The requirements for different size and levels of local governments should be differentiated. Larger local

governments with more comprehensive policy making and planning systems, as well as with greater capacities should incorporate the specific SEA requirements in full scope. Smaller local governments should be enabled and guided to select only the key plans and programmes that will be subject to SEA.

With regards to the policy instruments supporting the wide-spread adoption of environmental management systems a different set of recommendations can be made. These consider the voluntary nature of this instrument, as well as the policy context within which local governments operate.

3. An information campaign should be launched that focuses on high level local government officials and inform them about the advantages and benefits of applying EMS at local governments. The campaign should also provide directions to specific methodological guidance that can be used by mid-level officials likely to be responsible for implementation.

4. Technical support and guidance should be made available for local governments to implement EMS building upon the existing environmental management practices. Special emphasis should be placed upon the potential means of EMS implementation through elaborating already adopted municipal environmental programmes.

5. Targeted funds should be made available for local governments that decide to implement comprehensive environmental management systems. These funds should provide unconditional allowances for all eligible local governments but amounts should be differentiated by size, income and geographic location.

6. Further incentive is to be provided through providing advantages for local governments that have implemented environmental management systems in applying for central funding.

Article referred to
Gábor Szarvas 'Policy making and strategic environmental assessment at Hungarian local governments'
http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00001850/